

Book reviews

Alison Gyger, *Opera for the Antipodes: Opera in Australia 1881-1939*
Sydney: Currency Press and Pellinor, 1990. \$49.95, pp. viii, 364

The arrival of a spate of books on the history of 'Entertaining Australia' (the title of the most recent large-scale offering by the ever-adventurous Currency Press) has focussed attention upon aspects of cultural history hitherto barely given recognition in the mainstream histories of Australia. The performing arts have played a significant but almost totally overlooked part in the emergence of the Australian urban landscape, in the unfolding of class structures, in attitudes to leisure, to education, to travel and distance, and even to nationalism and patriotism. Music in Australia has barely been considered by historians, in fact also by very few Australian musicologists, let alone evaluated.

Alison Gyger's book on the history of opera in Australia between 1881 and 1939 therefore is a significant addition to the small but growing number of recent volumes that aim to document—systematically and authoritatively—various theatrical or musical enterprises in Australia. The most notable ones on opera are Harold Love's *The Golden Age of Australian Opera* (Sydney: Currency Press, 1981), *Through the Opera Glass: A Chronological Register of Operas Performed in South Australia 1836 to 1988* (Adelaide, 1991), produced by Robyn Holmes with The Friends of The State Opera of South Australia, and recent articles on opera in Brisbane by Patricia Kelly and Jenny Dawson. This type of research focuses on musical performance rather than on composition and takes account of the process of music-making and critical reception, not just the product. It serves not only to further understanding of Australia's musical heritage but provides raw material for all Australian cultural historians. Such documentation should herald a timely re-evaluation of the nation's cultural life and identity that embraces the impact of such an exotic transplanted tradition as opera in its 'Antipodean' guise.

Opera for the Antipodes is a chronological account of operatic performance in Australia between the end of William Lyster's 'golden reign' and the commencement of World War II. This largely determines its style as well as content. As Gyger makes clear in the Introduction, the book is designed primarily as a 'work of record—establishing the facts of long-forgotten seasons'. It aims to tell the story of a transplanted artform taking root in the Antipodes through the role of visiting operatic companies, mainly Italian in style and origin and in the hands of an assortment of impresarios. Gyger

provides twenty-five chapters, each headed by an appropriately catchy title, relating the activities within a particular year or providing an account of the season of one significant touring company.

The book focuses primarily on visiting professional opera companies: the repertoire, the touring seasons, the role and influence of the principal players in the story—singers, conductors, impresarios—and the evaluation of taste and performance standards through contemporary criticism. This book is written as a narrative. It does not aim at historical evaluation or analysis of the social or musical context, though its various critical insights make it a book of criticism as much as a documentary history. It reflects Alison Gyger's own literary rather than historical background.

The narrative is pieced together almost exclusively from the newspapers of the day. This methodology is made viable by the widespread and detailed advertising and reviewing of opera that took place in the various newspaper and magazine columns (including the social pages) across the period specified. The emphasis on newspapers reflects what Gyger complains is a dearth of other types of available source material—of programmes, pictures, letters and other personal documents, diaries, and managements' records. It is quite possible that other sources do in fact exist, but these are most likely to be held by individuals and certainly not collected nor organised and available to researchers in any meaningful and useful way. For instance only recently has Lina Marsi's *Index to the Australian Musical News 1911-1963* (Melbourne: Lima, 1990), together with a complete set of volumes on microfiche, become available. Gyger certainly should have used this as an additional source. Nevertheless, where possible, Gyger has attempted to substantiate her evidence by avoiding single sources for her reference material.

With the trend towards monopolistic ownership and parochial reporting in today's press, the methodology of using solely Australian newspapers for judging artistic standard has increasingly doubtful validity, but in the period under review, the existence of at least two significant papers at any one time in each of the major capital cities, and the repetition of the seasons from capital to capital, provides a fair cross-section of critical opinion to balance and counterbalance views and news. Moreover, in the selections in the book, the critics of the

time reveal themselves considerably well versed in the art of singing and knowledgeable about the repertoire and the standards expected of 'international' operatic performance. That this is so provides considerable insight into the values of the newspaper editors and of the reading and concert-going public of the day, and will be of interest to social and literary, as well as music, historians. The increase in the number of releases of historical sound recordings and the efforts at collection by such institutions as the National Film and Sound Archive has also made it increasingly possible to check contemporary critical opinion of particular singers against the sound itself, though Gyger has not set herself any such task.

Some concerns about the book could have been alleviated with a more thorough introduction that established the parameters of the research and the judgements therein. For example, clear indication that the book dealt only with professional seasons of opera, by recognised professional companies under the control of professional entrepreneurs, would have alleviated the problem of a significant amount of local operatic activity being obscured by the emphasis on imported companies. The Australian Opera League, with its attempts to found an 'Australian' opera, the productions within singing studios of various private teachers, the various and intermittent attempts in each state to found permanent opera companies and the development of the Conservatoria as major alternative providers of continuous operatic production: none of this is portrayed except in passing reference. Thus the tension between the impact of the foreign import and the local endeavour is not explored. Gyger does not seek to evaluate the contribution—or lack of contribution—of the visiting artists and seasons to the development of singers, operatic production and audience in Australia, nor to do more than state the use of Australian orchestras and choruses or observe the employment of more Australian-born female singers than men. The unknowing reader would barely gain the impression

that Australia had operatic activity of its own beyond the tours of foreign companies—in fact the content of the book is biased by the very nature of the newspaper source materials, which convey in the main a picture only of professional activity. Understanding the relationship between professional, amateur and student is essential to interpreting the heritage and growth of an 'Australian' opera presence.

There are other parameters which need explanation. One wonders at the exclusion of Gilbert and Sullivan and other lighter operas when the picture of changing taste and type of audience in Australia towards lighter fare is central to the story of the struggle of 'grander' opera from the 1890s, and to the nature and influence of such entrepreneurial firms as J.C. Williamson's. The lack of social analysis and context is at times frustrating. Moreover, the emphasis upon Sydney and Melbourne reflects a pattern in Australian histories: the likes of Adelaide, Brisbane and Perth, significant participants in the touring circuit, get only scant reference in terms of where a company toured—thus the need for additional specific regional histories.

Readers may also tire of the detailed references within the text itself of cast lists, repertoire and dates, however much the total makes for a fascinating story. Had this information been provided in some kind of chronological register or in more tabular form, as Gyger begins to do in the repertoire and first performance lists in the Appendices, the text may have been freed for more commentary and analysis and for historical rather than strictly narrative purposes.

However, the book establishes clearly its own particular, if narrowly defined, objectives and style. It is accurate, informative and interesting. To this end, it is a pioneering work of major consequence and a significant resource when it comes to any research in Australia's cultural history during this era.

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